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ABSTRACT

The use of tournament forensics in teaching vital skills to the disadvantaged is discussed. Four case histories illustrate the success of such an approach to providing students with basic communication skills. Some of the difficulties peculiar to working with the underskilled in an academic environment are described. (DB)

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FORENSICS FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

By

Harry L. Miles

More and more college freshmen need training in basic communication techniques. They lack skill in organizing, documenting, and presenting their ideas to any audience. Few of them realize that formal tools exist which will help them analyze situations, discover other opinions, and word their analysis to persuade the listeners of the truth of the proposition.

Unfortunately, tournament forensics excludes the untrained almost completely. We coaches and educators turn to the well-educated student for our recruits. We turn to the student who possesses skill in argumentation or who has basic background necessary to coping with our complex debate propositions. We automatically exclude, therefore, the poverty-stricken, undereducated student who becomes more common on our campuses every day.

Tournament forensics provides an untapped channel of highly effective educational techniques to deal with the underskilled student. Forensics, whether individual events or debate, forces the student to become familiar with basic educational tools -- indexes, source material, digests. Further, the student must extract the essential information from the material, organize it, and then present it to a highly critical audience. The constant feedback intrinsic to forensic competition provides incentive for improvement that most programs lack. No matter how dedicated an English professor or how quickly he reads, the student's course cannot give almost instant feedback with constructive criticism. Further, a grade

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does not move the student to work as hard as does the acclaim of his fellows and the personal relationship he builds with his coach. Thus, when the coach or fellow debaters indicate flaws in technique, the context of the criticism prevents it from becoming a discouraging indication of personal failure.

Also, the trophy at the end of the tournament trail provides more incentive to work than does the grade or criticism of any teacher. Many young people never acquire sufficient training in high school because they can't see any direct reward for all the effort. We have all heard complaints from both students and colleagues that our curricula never relate to anything important. Unrelated curricula fail to excite the student; only the grade provides a sense of accomplishment and that only at the end of the semester. Forensics, on the other hand, rewards success and the effort that precedes success with a tangible trophy and the acclaim of the coach and fellow students. The personal commendation from a faculty member may mean more than we realize to a student who has never associated with one save as student to teacher. Even a blurb in the local paper or school news lets one stand taller than ever before. All these immediate and tangible rewards show the disadvantaged student that work leads to something he can cherish. Therefore, he works.

The twin tools of feedback and incentive force the student to improve himself faster than any other method I have seen in my high school teaching of all types of students. He learns how to read for information, how to extract the important ideas ffom the material, how to follow up an author or a topic, how to organize his synthesis of the material, and how to present his ideas with more force than he had thought possible. Forensics gives him a "how to" curriculum that leads to definite rewards. Of course he responds.

We have been gravely remiss as educators by not using tournament forensics to teach vital skills. Instead of taking the brilliant student and showing him how to improve himself, we should take the marginal student and show him how to survive.

Four case histories drawn from programs, specifically designed to accommodate the disadvantaged, show success. Students who had never succeeded in an academic environment suddenly change their goals and methods after exposure to tournament debate and speech. One young lady, had been suspended from school for striking the dean. After she returned, we recruited her for the team. She competed over a two year period, finally emerging as one of our best individual events competitors. Her academic average rose several points; she applied to college. However, her most important realization was contained in the statement: "Debate has been important to me because it teaches you to fight without hitting." Now she is able to fit into an academic environment and does well in college without the spur of immediate reward.

Another student came to my attention as a result of a neighborhood corporation for which we ran a program. He was a twenty-two year old high school drop-out who "couldn't make it." He joined the program because he couldn't find another paying summer job. Even though we never threatened to terminate his employment, he became involved in the program because of its intellectual challenge and immediate rewards. He began to research topics of community interest and partake of opportunities to speak competitively in front of a community audience. After the summer, he decided to return to night high school because he felt that he could hold his own in argument and academic work.

A third student also participated in the high school debating team. His problem derived from his Spanish descent; he feared that he could not speak English well enough to be understood. As a result, he never participated in classroom discussion; he never argued against a verbal attack on his opinions. He emerged as a fine competitor, having needed little more than the reassurance of his fellow students and one faculty member to convince him of his worth. Incidentally, the process worked both ways; the better prepared students began to realize that the difference in grade point average depended more upon background than upon inate intelligence. As a result of his forensic activity, he changed his post high school plans to include a college education with a professional major.

The fourth individual came to us through another community corporation sponsored activity. In this case, the person possessed natural ability; as a militant, his history of whipping up crowds and organizing demonstrations would impress anyone. His problem consisted of his not being able to break away from the rhetoric of revolution. Even when he sat down to negotiate, he would use the syntax of violence. After giving several violent speeches in competition, and learning why they lost, he changed his style to suit the audience. As he started to win, he followed the changes with close attention and carried them over into his other activities. As a result, he became much more effective in the community situation as well as the community-outsider alk session. At last report, the change pleased both his superiors, who started to see greater results with less effort, and his opponents, who at least felt that talking now served some purpose.

Thus far, I have tried to show that tournament forensics with its win-lose, prize-oriented format provides an excellent route to providing

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all people with basic communication skills. Next, I would like to discuss some of the difficulties peculiar to working with the underskilled in an academic environment.

Recruiting the students who need remedial work is difficult. Since they do not respond to normal communication channels like circulars, posters, and leaflets, the usual recruiting program does not reach them. In order to recruit the disadvantaged student, the program - director must seek him out personally. Sometimes two or three visits are necessary. The student must feel welcome; visits by older team members would help, especially those affiliated with the group from which the potential recruit comes. H wever, since most of us don't have the time or staff to personally visit two hundred students, other methods are necessary.

In many cases, campus groups will recruit for you. You have to convince the group leaders that you represent help without policy direction. In other words, you will give participants the benefit of your skills without interfering with their functioning in the group. Also, campus groups which recruit for you may ask for some return obligation -- an exhibition debate in front of a community audience on a controversial topic, or research into a particular political problem on which they are working. In any event, recruits from campus groups will be highly motivated toward success because they will be out to prove that they are as good as anyone else on the team. Thus, local militants can become an excellent source of team material.

If you maintain contacts with high schools, the high school's college office will provide you with lists of good candidates. The method possesses the additional advantage of endearing you to the admissions staff. With most colleges competing for the same dis-

advantaged candidates, the personal visit and personal attention will give your school an edge. Come budget time, you might point this out. The point remains, however, that no matter what extra recruiting effort you use, you must use some extra recruiting effort to engage the attention of the disadvantaged.

The next problem that arises is retaining the disadvantaged student once you have recruited him. The normal drop-out rate among tournament debaters is quite high; a student with less skill and a more delicate ego should leave even more quickly. Fortunately, the disadvantaged student will more likely stay than not once he has been recruited. He craves a relationship with the faculty; he feels alone. He has few friends in the general college population. Most professors look at him differently from his peers if they look at him at all. Further, his teachers have the power of pass-fail. A personal relationship with a faculty member who does not have grade derived authority will attract the student to the program. If you then show him continual improvement and encouragement, he will stay without you as long as he stays in school.

The key to showing continual improvement is to articulate goals which can be achieved. Even a debater with the most delicate ego will accept continual failure if it is the price of learning. Further the fact that students with better preparation fail to win will reassure him. At some point, you must shift from pessimism to optimism. The optimism can be qualified -- for example, instead of expecting 0 -6, you now expect 2 - 4 or 3-3. The point is, however, that you must set the goals, explain them in detail, and then point out how each tournament contributes toward fulfillment.

Thus, you should get the disadvantaged student into competition as soon as possible. If you don't, he will notice the difference in treatment and resent it. You will lose him. Also, if you delay his entrance into competition, he will be far behind his teammates who have been competing since October. Then, losing becomes shameful, not expected. Once you bruise his ego, the debater will tend to drop-out of the program. On the other hand, if you nurture him and bring him along slowly but consistently, you will develop a fine competitor who also has a much better chance of succeeding in an alien academic environment.

Since forensics can provide such benefits to the disadvantaged, I feel that the American Forensic Association, the National Forensic League, and any other debate organization should do all they can to encourage the participation of disadvantaged students. We should, for example, certify neighborhood corporations as schools and allow them to participate in our invitational tournaments even if they don't meet the initial standards. We should seek out community facilities that deal with the re-education of drug addicts and drop-outs, certify them as schools, and allow them to compete on the same basis. We should establish funds and seek out grants for limited budget schools so that a coach can send disadvantaged debaters to tournaments without cutting into his full competiton schedule. We should do all that is possible to make forensics a true educational activity in the total sense of the word instead of a mere extra-curricular quasi-sport.

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